

NHFC 402 – The Craft of Natural History Storytelling

Richard Thomas

Exercise: Short Story

THE LAMB AND THE WIND

by Julia Kelbling

The night the lamb was born, it was unusually cold and windy for September. The baby started shivering the moment he hit the ground. He was wet and felt miserable. What had happened to him? He opened his eyes and found himself stranded in a new world. Next to him was a big fluffy something. Although he had never seen it before, this was all he ever knew. It smelled familiar, and instinctively he struggled to get closer. The thing didn't move. When the lamb cuddled up to it, full of hope, he felt the warmth of life leaving the body next to him. He prodded his nose into the wool, searching for something he didn't know what it was. He didn't find it.

The wind howled evil promises into the night.

The lamb's ears flickered. The baby summoned all of what little strength there was in his body and tried to get up. He had awfully many legs and they didn't yet want to support him. Every time he had managed to get his bum up in the air, he couldn't get his front legs to cooperate and then collapsed again. When he finally stood on all fours for the first time, he swayed back and forth like a blade of grass in the breeze. He made a shaky step, then two, and toppled over. He cried out in frustration. Frustration about not being able to walk like he wanted. Frustration about being cold and wet. Frustration about having what felt like a hole in his belly. And most of all, frustration about being all alone when something in him knew he wasn't actually supposed to be alone.

The lamb's little baby voice didn't make much of an impression to the wind. The helpless cries were blown away on a long journey to nowhere. The wind was no friend.

He had to get up again and move, or else he would be drawn into the darkness surrounding him, creeping closer, waiting for him to give up. This time he already knew how to unfold his legs from underneath and prize himself up. Slowly he started walking, carefully setting one foot at a time, wobbling forward as straight as he possibly could. He didn't know where he was going. He hadn't walked for very long, when suddenly a white ghost appeared in front of him, straight out of the starless night. The baby stopped, startled. He gave an anxious call, asking a question. The answer came quickly. The ghost spoke his language! The lamb hastily staggered over to the kind ghost, seeking that something that would make his roaring belly go quiet. He knew the ghost had what he wanted, it smelled sweet and tempting and warm. But before he could lock his lips around the promising spring of milk, the ghost let out an indignant bleat and kicked him hard. The lamb flew.

The wind laughed.

His ribs were bruised and he was aching all over his body. He wept again, louder this time, crying out his pain into the dark and cruel world. He cried as hard as he could, complaining, protesting against his fate. When finally the sun stretched out its rosy fingers over the hills, driving away the darkness, the lamb's voice was no more. He would never be able to speak again.

In the morning, the shepherd's daughter found him lying motionless and chilled to the bones on dewy grass. She carefully picked up the bundle of lamb and stuck him under her woolen coat. She brought him home. She showed him to her parents, and together they kneeled down by the fireplace, carefully massaging the little limp body back to life with warm towels. What had looked more like an underfed wet poodle actually started to resemble a lamb. Finally clean and dry, the baby's cotton-white coat fluffed up. Some brown spots on his face hadn't gone away with cleaning though. They turned out to be permanent.

The mother heated some sheep's milk and filled it into a baby bottle. She stuck the rubber nipple into the lamb's mouth, and he automatically started suckling, first slowly, then faster and faster until his belly was blown up like a balloon. He loved the feeling of warm milk running down his throat. The lamb drank the whole bottle at once.

Exhausted, he fell asleep with the nipple still in his mouth. The girl smiled. She tenderly wrapped him into a thick blanket and placed him in front of the fire.

They called him Norbert.

Soon they found out that Norbert was not like other orphaned lambs they'd had before or like any lamb at all. He couldn't baa or produce any sound with his voice, for that matter. He was a mute lamb. He would stand there and try to say something, his mouth opening and closing. Out came nothing but hollow air.

The shepherd decided to introduce baby Norbert to a possible surrogate sheep mum. One of her two lambs had died soon after birth. She was the only ewe having lost a baby this lambing season, therefore this was the only chance to possibly pair up Norbert with the mother he so desperately needed. The shepherd skinned the dead lamb and draped Norbert in the bloody hide, fur side up, then showed him to the ewe. She sniffed suspiciously, and usually in such a case the ewe would accept the little cuckoo lamb as her own because it smelled like her baby. This sheep however wasn't fooled. She knew something was wrong when the lamb tried to talk to her but wasn't able to produce a single bleat. This was not her son. He had had a strong voice. She turned her back on Norbert and simply walked away, disgusted. And when he hobbled after her with trusting baby steps, she suddenly turned around and charged at him like a ram. Norbert almost fainted, he was so scared. The shepherd's dog just barely saved the lamb by jumping in between him and the angry ewe, barking like mad. The sheep ran off. Norbert was shaking, the blood-dripping hide of the dead lamb hanging off him like a wet raincoat. A sudden, violent wind gust blew under the dangling skin, flipping it over Norbert's head, spraying his own kind's blood all over his face. Norbert panicked, silently.

The wind turned east, satisfied.

So Norbert the lamb had to be raised by hand. The shepherd's daughter was delighted about things turning out this way and took over all the responsibilities of caring for the baby. Every few hours he demanded his bottle, no matter if day or night. Even though he couldn't baa, he learned quickly to make his new mother aware of

what he wanted. He would stomp on the ground with his little hooves when he was hungry, step on the girl's feet or even try to climb onto her if he caught her sitting, suckle a finger if he could reach it, and he would be completely merciless in his pursuit. The girl had to make sure that there was always enough milk for her lamb, so she went several times a day to coax one of the mother sheep into letting her milk the animal – which was a very hard task. Norbert followed the girl wherever she went, but he kept his distance from other sheep. It was as if he had accepted that he was an outcast. He befriended the Shepherd's dog instead. The old mongrel had taken an instant liking to the orphan from the day he had saved his life. Whenever he was not out working with the shepherd, he played with Norbert. The girl, the dog and the lamb often walked through the fields down to the beach, where they enjoyed chasing each other until they collapsed in the sand, exhausted. At night Norbert even was allowed to share the girl's bed – after he had been housetrained, obviously – not so much because he had been encouraged to do so but because he had decided that this was his rightful place to be. His mom was in that bed and he wanted to be close to her. There was no point in throwing him out, he kept coming back, and leaving him outside with the dog did not work either, as Norbert would throw himself against the door of the little house repeatedly and scratch it with his hooves, which was not only annoying to the family, but he would hurt himself. So the girl's parents had reluctantly given in and allowed Norbert in her bed at night – but only after the mother had inspected him for cleanliness every evening. At nighttime, Norbert was probably the cleanest little sheep on the planet, as he often had to go into the bathtub before he was ready for bed.

It was a good life.

The wind had gone silent. There was no hurry. It wasn't time yet.

The girl's task of keeping her increasingly hungrier lamb satisfied became easier when Norbert learned that grass and herbs could be eaten and were tasty on top of that! Soon he had less time to play with his friends, because what he cared about most now was to graze. He grew an impressive paunch, and the shepherd was very satisfied with Norbert.

One night, sleeping in bed with his surrogate mother like always, Norbert dreamed about when he was born. The memory made him

wake up, shaking. He perked up his ears and listened carefully. First he heard nothing but the girl's regular breathing. But then... There it was. The rattling of the windows. The clapping of a door left ajar. The soft whistle.

The wind was back.

Norbert buried his face under the blanket, not wanting to hear. The wind turned into a late summer thunderstorm. A tree nearby was struck by lightning.

The next morning, when Norbert and the girl got up, the shepherd sat outside the little house, sharpening a knife. Norbert sniffed the air. It was moist and spoke of more rain to arrive soon. The air was dead calm.

Relieved, Norbert went to get breakfast and observed from his hill how the girl seemingly had an argument with her father. She was crying. Her dad said something to her that made her run inside the house and slam the door shut behind her. She wouldn't come out again all day.

Later that afternoon Norbert went down to the house, in mood for playing. The old dog came to him, inviting him for a chase. But the shepherd called him off, sounding stern. The dog stuck his tail between his legs and whimpered. He disappeared into his doghouse. Norbert stood there, wondering. He saw the shepherd approaching with one hand behind his back, calling him softly. Norbert leaped forward happily, as the shepherd had always given him a treat when he had hidden his hand behind his back like that. He poked his nose into the man's thigh in eager expectation.

Norbert didn't know what was happening to him when suddenly he was lifted into the air by two strong hands and thrown onto his back. The shepherd grabbed the lamb underneath the front legs, pulled him up and clamped him in between his legs as if he wanted to shear him. Norbert was a bit shocked, but not scared. He just sat there on his bum, all fours stretched out stiffly. He couldn't move much, but it was okay. He patiently awaited whatever would happen next. It would be a new game for sure. Norbert sensed the man's warm hand stroking his throat. It felt good. He bent back his neck in pleasure. The

shepherd spoke to him in a calming voice. Norbert glanced at the man with his long-lashed charcoal eyes.

The sharpened blade went through the lamb's throat in a single, soft movement.

A light summer breeze came up, bringing with it the faint scent of blooming roses.

The last thing Norbert felt was the wind tenderly caressing his face.



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